

MINDFULNESS AS A TOOL TO BUILD RESILIENCE

What is resilience?

So you think the glass is half-full, eh? Evolutionarily speaking, it's probably half empty. You are much more likely to notice, react to, and remember unpleasant, distressful and negative experiences than good ones. Our brain has this negativity bias hard-wired in to ensure our survival, as individuals and as a species. Throughout human history, those more attuned to danger were more likely to survive.

Despite the sad demise of sabre-tooth tigers, the survival mechanism remains. Dangers come in the shape of tight deadlines at work, heavy workload, job insecurity and in the personal sphere rocky relationships, illnesses and family worries. This stress can impact our health, disturbing the body's internal balance.

It's absolutely normal to have difficult moments, triggering negative emotions. But it's how we deal with it that counts. **How we react to those "dangers"** – the challenging situations, emotions and feelings that we all inevitably experience as human beings.

"People are not afraid of things, but of how they view them." – Epictetus

And here comes the definition of **resilience**. According to [Cambridge Dictionary](#), resilience is "the ability to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened". There is also another definition: "the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity" which is a great metaphor for a resilient person.

*Think of someone you believe is resilient. Why are they resilient?
What approaches do they use?*

Resilient people ...

1. **Are aware** of situations, their own emotional reactions, and the behavior of others.
2. **Maintain control** of a situation and think of new ways to tackle problems.
3. **Overcome major difficulties without engaging in dysfunctional behavior.**
4. **Keep energy levels up** under pressure.
5. **Smoothly adapt to changes.**
6. **Quickly bounce back** from difficulties.

7. **Have strong social connections** (friends, family, co-workers ...).
8. **Look for help** (books, psychotherapy, support groups).

The power of resilient people lies in noticing, soaking in and building on positive experiences: developing a positive outlook and positive explanatory style. Many studies show a direct link between resilience and happiness and meaning in life.

When the road gets rocky, what do you do? Where do you find the inner strength to manage during difficult times of uncertainty to support your coping and resilience?

Building resilience with mindfulness

“I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become.” – Carl Jung

You can develop a resilient mindset through **practicing mindfulness**. It is a powerful tool that offers the opportunity to make a radical shift in orientation. There are many ways to incorporate mindfulness into our daily lives. As we become increasingly mindful, we begin to respond from a place of choice. In other words, we opt for resilience.

We can develop inner resources that help us strengthen our resilience. These include:

CALM

With mindfulness practices, we help our brain feel calm and safe so we can see clearly and problem solve more effectively when faced with challenges. It’s about shifting ourselves to a more emotionally balanced state during stressful events. Having a calm brain helps you manage stressful situations and builds your resilience!

Tip: One way of calming down is the **“Name it to tame it”** practice – verbalizing internally or externally, for example to a friend, and communicating how you are feeling, in order to get some distance from it.

ACCEPTANCE

See and accept the facts as they are, distinguishing them from feelings. Acceptance isn’t about giving up. It is having the strength to let go of control and stop fighting reality.

William James, pioneer in American psychology: “Be willing to have it so. Acceptance of what has happened is the first step to overcoming the consequence of any misfortune.”

Humanist psychologist Carl Rogers: “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself exactly as I am, then I can change.”

COMPASSION

Don’t be judgmental about yourself or others. Be mindful of your self-talk. Be kinder and more supportive. If mindfulness brings the wisdom to see clearly, then compassion brings a loving heart. [See Practice 2 below.](#)

GRATITUDE

Notice and appreciate things around you. Gratitude practices allow you to stop and reflect on the good. Gratitude helps you manage any hardships you are dealing with. It lowers anxiety, soothes symptoms of illness, and makes you sleep better. [See Practice 3 below.](#)

OPENNESS

Be more open to viewing even the most difficult situations as opportunities for growth. Trust that they have something to teach you, and expect to learn.

CREATIVITY

Draw on your power to visualize and create the results you desire. At the same time, in the spirit of acceptance, you are not attached to or fixated on your own expectations.

SELF-CARE

Start paying attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities you enjoy and find relaxing. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience. The ability to relax is key to resilience.

Tip: You can recharge your batteries surprisingly easily, for example by:

- ❓ Using simple relaxation techniques – see [Practice 4 below.](#)
- ❓ Taking longer breaks (during the workday, evenings, weekends, vacations).
- ❓ Taking regular microbreaks (eg. when transitioning between projects).
- ❓ Having quality sleep (see June issue of the NextMind Time magazine).
- ❓ Engaging in moderate and vigorous physical activity.

PRACTICE – RESILIENCE

Practice 1: Self-awareness and Noticing to Shift your Attention

When you are facing a challenge, sit in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.

1. Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breath.
2. It's natural for your attention to become distracted. When that happens, simply return to your breath.
3. While focusing on your breath, allow your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and body sensations to enter your awareness as you perceive the external situation.
4. Now ask yourself: What are the facts of the situation? What are my thoughts, feelings, beliefs and body sensations? How am I responding?

With practice, this exercise can bring you to your calm, reflective center. This safe haven, in which you can rest and see more clearly, holds and contains everything arising for you in the present. From here, it is possible to deconstruct,

recontextualize and reframe your original fear-based feelings and reactions, embracing them without being a victim.

Practice 2: Self-Compassion Break to Rewire Your Brain for Resilience

This is an exercise in shifting your awareness and bringing acceptance to bear on the experience of the moment, in the moment. It helps to practice this when an emotional upset or distress is still reasonably manageable – to create and strengthen the neural circuits that can do this shifting and re-conditioning when things are really tough.

- ❓ Any moment you notice a surge of a difficult emotion – boredom, contempt, remorse, shame – pause, put your hand on your heart (this activates the release of oxytocin, the hormone of safety and trust).
- ❓ Empathize with your experience – recognize the suffering – and say to yourself, “this is upsetting” or “this is hard!” or “this is scary!” or something similar, to acknowledge and care about yourself as the experience of something distressing.
- ❓ Repeat these phrases to yourself (or phrases that work for you):

May I be kind to myself in this moment.
(This breaks the survival responses and negative thought loops.)
May I accept this moment exactly as it is.
May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment. May I give myself all the compassion I need.

- ❓ Continue repeating the phrases until you can feel the internal shift: the compassion and kindness and care for yourself becoming stronger than the original negative emotion.

Pause and reflect on your experience. Notice if any opportunities for wise action arise.

Practice 3: Daily Gratitude List to Build Your Resilience

Maintain a simple list of things you are grateful for or are looking forward to. On paper or in a spreadsheet. Find a regular time – first thing in the morning or at the end of the workday – to review and add points. Studies have shown that builds your resilience.

1. Identify (up to) 10 things/people you are grateful for.
2. Be quiet for five minutes and ask for guidance for the day.
3. Send love to three people who are bothering you.

MY DAILY GRATITUDE LIST

Practice 4: Daily Relaxation to Calm Your Body and Mind

Five easy steps to relax your body and mind:

1. **Relax your tongue and jaw** – you may try to intentionally touch your lips. It has a soothing, calming effect on your body and mind.
2. **Open your lips slightly** – it eases stressful thinking (unthinking subvocalizations).
3. Do several **long exhalations** – (the parasympathetic nervous system regulates stress response and handles exhaling) – breathe in for a count of 3, out for a count of 7.
4. And now, for a minute or so, breathe so that your inbreaths and outbreaths are **equally long** (e.g. count up to 5) – it slows down your heart rate.
5. Lastly – **relax your diaphragm** – the muscle below the ribcage helping your lungs to breathe – put your hand on your belly while breathing, feeling your belly rising with each deep slow inbreath and falling with each outbreath.

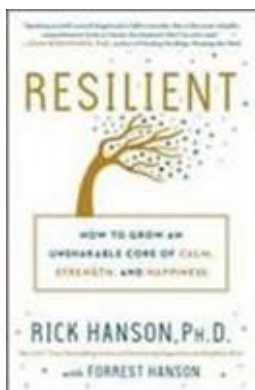
All these steps lead to the **resting state of your body and mind**.

Sources:

1. [Mindfulness: The Art of Cultivating Resilience, PsychCentral, October 8, 2018](#)
 2. [11 Ways to Cultivate Resilience, PsychCentral, October 8, 2018](#)
 3. [Building Resilience with Mindfulness, Mind Life Project](#)
 4. [Characteristics of Resilient People, Verywell Mind, April 28, 2020](#)
 5. [Resilience and the Practice of Gratitude, Psychology Today, March 29, 2020](#)
 6. [To Build Resilience, Write Down What You're Grateful For, HBR, August 30, 2016](#)
 7. [How Gratitude Can Help You Build Resilience, Shine, September 14, 2017](#)
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RECOMMENDED READING

Book: “Resilient” by Rick Hanson & Forrest Hanson



How to Grow an Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength, and Happiness

With his trademark blend of neuroscience, mindfulness, and positive psychology, New York Times bestselling author Dr. Rick Hanson shows you how to develop twelve vital inner strengths hardwired into your own nervous system. Then no matter what life throws at you, you'll be able to feel less stressed, pursue opportunities with confidence, and stay calm and centered in the face of adversity. This practical guide is full of concrete suggestions, experiential practices, personal examples, and insights into the brain. Warm, encouraging, and down-to-earth, Dr. Hanson's step-by-step approach is

grounded in the science of positive neuroplasticity. He explains how to overcome the brain's negativity bias, release painful thoughts and feelings, and replace them with self-compassion, self-worth, joy, and inner peace.

Article: “5 Ways to Boost Your Resilience at Work” by Rich Fernandez

In this [article](#) you will find more tips, based on neuroscience, behavioral and organizational research, how you can develop resilience and stay motivated in the face of chronic negative stress and constantly increasing demands, complexity and change at work.

“(…) the most resilient individuals and teams aren’t the ones that don’t fail, but rather the ones that fail, learn and thrive because of it. Being challenged – sometimes severely – is part of what activates resilience as a skill set.”

The MWC would like to thank the authors of this article, written by Dentons Global Law Firm. Please acknowledge Dentons if reproducing or sharing this article.

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